China's migrant workers

Wildcat's history and analysis of internal migration in China from the 1950s until today.

Article translated from German supplement "Unrest in China", wildcat #80, Winter 2007/08

Faces of Migration

Even before the beginning of the reforms in 1978 socialist China had experienced migration movements. In the early 1950s millions came from the countryside to the cities to work in the new state industries. At first, they were needed there, but with unemployment and problems with supplies of e.g. food in the mid-50s the government introduced a strict household registration system (hukou). The hukou-system restricted the mobility of most Chinese and kept them in the countryside for the next decades. It controlled whether someone stayed at the place of registration, and the allocation of food and other resources was directly tied to it. For the construction of heavy industries - the central part of the soviet-style modernization program - peasants in socialist China were bled through low grain prices. Only a minority of people were allowed to live in the cities and benefit from the achievements of the socialist planning state.

But the migration did not end here. The famines of the "Great Leap Forward" (1958-62) set off large waves of it. And in the 1960s and 70s millions of people from rural areas were pulled into the cities to do the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs in state companies. These migrants were only temporarily employed and had to go back to the countryside when the job ended. During their stay in the cities they were still excluded from the social benefits of urban workers (the "Iron Rice-Bowl").

The first large migration movement after the beginning of the reforms was the "returnees". In the 1960s and 1970s millions of young people were sent to the countryside in the wake of the Cultural Revolution to "learn from the peasants". The Party wanted to push them out of the cities in order to get the social and political unrest of the Cultural Revolution under control and to lower urban unemployment. After 1978 many of these migrants successfully fought for the return to the cities. Many worked in state industries; others became self-employed and

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took part in undermining the banning of private businesses. They became street peddlers or worked in urban services.

In the early 1980s the stream of parts of the rural population into the cities began, the result of both pull- and push-factors. Land distribution to family-

households and increasing agricultural productivity led to a "surplus population" of labor power in the countryside.

Meanwhile, companies in villages and small cities (which to a certain extent had gained independence from the central state), the new "special economic zones" and later expanding state industries were all searching for cheap labor. When at the end of the 1980s and particularly in the early 1990s the state invested in many infrastructure projects and urban construction, and when at the same time foreign investments in industrial enterprises expanded, many millions of mostly young people left the countryside to find jobs and earn money in the cities. At the same time they wanted to take part in the excitement of city life, in modernity and the freedom to consume that came along with the reforms. However, until now the new workers did not become permanent city dwellers. The hukou-system, dividing all Chinese into urban people and rural people, still operates. Whoever leaves the village to go to the city today has to apply for a temporary work- and residence-permit. That permit is usually limited to one year and linked to employment. For this reason, migrant workers are still called mingong, peasants-who-became-workers. They lack the same rights as the urban hukou-holders and are excluded from many urban services.

Numbers and Faces

The exact number of all migrants is unclear. Even the government newspaper China Daily gives figures between 150 million - or 11,5 percent of the population, nearly double the figure of 1996 - and 200 million (28.11.2006). According to 2005 statistics the urban population was about 560 million - including the mingong and their families who lived in the cities for more than 6 months -, that is about 43 percent of the 1,3 billion people in all of China. 358 million had an urban hukou, 949 a rural hukou. That means that about 200 million people without an urban hukou stayed in the city.1 We cannot be too sure about these numbers since many migrants do not register with the urban administration.

The State Commission for Population- and Family-Planning estimates that there is still a labor surplus of 150 to 170 million in the countryside (China Daily, 18.01.2007). So the migration to the cities will continue, and the army of migrant workers will grow even larger.

The government has to create at least ten million jobs every year, which is only possible if economic growth continues at the same pace.2

Until the end of the 1990s, migration dramatically changed the composition of Chinese labor.

The mingong predominantly work in factories, on construction sites, in mines, in agriculture, in producer services (security guards, cleaners, couriers) and as small level self-employed (in shops, in markets, as scavengers). Of all mingong 37 percent work in manufacturing industries, the rest mostly in construction (14 percent), in restaurants (12 percent) and in other services (12 percent; Lee 2007: 39). They account for 57.5 percent of the industrial workforce, 37 percent in services, among them most of the 20 million domestic workers. In the textile industry they account for up to 70 to 80 percent of workers (Lee 2007: 6), in construction 80 percent (out of 30 million construction workers), and in the chemical industry and in mining 56 percent (China Daily, 28.11.2006). 47.5 percent of all migrant workers are women, but in the centers of world market production there are many more: in Shenzhen, for example, they constitute 65.6 percent.

The migration has many faces: short-term residence in small cities near the villages, employment on large infrastructure projects, shifting back and forth between world market factories and the family farm, constant migration from one construction site to the next, seasonal

harvesting, and working in mines. But there is also a rural exodus due to the loss or expropriation of the family land and the subsequent move to the city. Some mingong work elsewhere for a few months, but return home for farm work during the harvest. Others stay in the city for longer periods, two or three years, without ever visiting their family. Apart from the labor migrants from the countryside, there are also many with a "small city"-hukou who move to provincial centers or the metropolitan areas around Beijing/Tianjin, the Yangtze delta and the Pearl River delta, if they can get better jobs there. Not all migrant workers originate from the villages.

Conditions and Problems

The working and living conditions of the mingong are quite diverse, depending on the sector, their skills and their experience. Often their first job is precarious, low-paid or dangerous.

And often they get it through people from their village who help them with their first steps in the city. Whether a mingong ends up on a construction site, in a factory or as a security guard partly depends on the sector where other people from their own region already work. After their first experiences the mingong try to find better jobs with a labor contract and a fixed income. Often the only way to do so is through (expensive) training programs. The China Daily gives some examples (20.1.2006): A 30-year old migrant worker from Henan started to work as a security guard in Beijing for banks and public buildings before he found a job in managing facilities. A 29-year old man from Shanxi also started as a security guard, then became an air conditioning technician and an express courier before he finally found something in marketing. A 25-year old woman from Shanxi worked as a domestic helper for an elderly woman and currently prepares for exams as a legal advisor. These situations do certainly not work out for everybody.

The mingong's most important aim is earning money. They work in factories, on construction sites, in households and mines, because they earn more than in agriculture or casual work at home. But even if wages at home are more or less the same - which can happen, in particular in the eastern provinces - there are still other reasons to migrate: young people want to escape from home, they want to see the world, to make a change, and to escape family control, too.

The mingong's working and living conditions in the city are precarious. Among the most important problems they face there are:

Low and unpaid wages

Wages have increased in the last few years, but barely keep up with inflation.3 In the world market factories and on construction sites the wage hovers around 1,000 Yuan (about 100

Euros) per month for unskilled workers working ten to twelve hours a day and having one or two days off per month. In suppliers' factories and services wages are lower. Minimum wages were raised in the last few years, but many enterprises do not pay them. Officially the minimum wage is around 300 to 800 Yuan, depending on the region.4 Often the migrant workers have to pay fees to employment agents or a deposit to the employing enterprise, which keeps the deposit to prevent workers from suddenly leaving the job whenever they find a better one.

A big problem is non-payment of wages. An investigation by China's National Statistic Bureau revealed that out of 30,000 workers questioned, 20 percent had received their wage late or had gotten only partial payment. On average the workers had to wait four months before getting paid (China Daily, 27.10.2006). Other research showed that three out of four mingong had problems getting their full wage. Often wages are not paid for months, and eventually many do not get the full sum (Lee 2007: 164). Wage non-payment is so widespread that in some sectors it is considered the norm. As long as enterprises supply them with a place to stay and food, the mingong do not stop working even if they are not paid. If

they stop working, they do not eat. They can only survive because most of the time they have a place to stay through the enterprise and intermittently get partial wage payments.

Furthermore, the mingong know that if everything goes wrong they can still return to their home village where the family cultivates a piece of land.

Bad working conditions

Whether in the factory or on the constructions sites, workers often work ten to twelve hours or longer every day. Many workers want to do overtime, because otherwise the wages are too low to send a part back to the family. Especially during times when many orders come in, workers are also forced to do overtime until late at night. In some sectors workers work seven days a week, with no day off; in other sectors there is one day off per month. Workers can only endure that because they periodically escape to the countryside - without getting paid for those days -, or simply change jobs in order to get time to relax in between.

Someone who wants to earn as much as possible in a few years before returning to the countryside can risk handling his or her labor power much more casually

compared with someone knowing that she or he has to spend the next decades in a factory. And the repressive factory regime with its degrading disciplinary measures for violations of the factory regulations - Lee calls it the "despotic" regime of production" (Lee 1998) - can only be endured for certain amount of time.

Long working hours, many sanctions, absent labor contracts and much more are violations of the Chinese Labor Law, but the local administrations in most cases do not act, not wanting to upset potential investors or endanger the bosses' profits.

Many accidents

The grueling work pace, no breaks, lack of sleep and outdated and defective machines, missing or lacking instructions and maintenance or simply disregarding safety measures to reach production goals are reasons for the high number of accidents with personal injuries.

The 5,000 deaths in mines (2006) are well known. Most of them are due to poor safety standards. The total number of deaths due to work accidents was around 100,000 in 2005

(Der Spiegel, 13.9.2006). Besides the overt injuries and casualties there also "hidden" forms, for instance those workers who constantly faint or even go crazy because they cannot stand the stress.

Missing social protection

Only 23 to 30 percent of all migrant workers in private companies have labor contracts (Lee 2007: 42; see above, too). The China Daily speaks of 40 percent out of 30,000 interviewees (China Daily, 27.10.2006). Accordingly, most do not have pension schemes or health insurance. In cases of illness or accidents the employers sometimes pay for the costs in minor cases, but do not want to take responsibility after major accidents and for chronic occupational diseases resulting from exposure to toxic chemicals. In those cases the migrant workers themselves have to bear the costs. Most of the time they cannot do so. All the family assets are spent - or the persons affected simply sicken and finally die. Migrant workers are also eligible for pensions if they have worked in the city for a while. When they return to the countryside they can ask to be paid their contributions but only if their employer has paid for social insurance according

to the Labor Laws. A Guangdong survey revealed that 73,8

percent of 1,500 migrant workers had no social insurance at all (2001). That is connected to frequent job changes and the fact that local administrations allow companies to register only ten or twenty percent of their workforce for social insurances - and to not register all workers as required by the law (Lee 2007: 47).

Poor living conditions

Many migrant workers suffer from cramped living conditions without private space. Because

of their rural hukou status, such workers are not entitled to get an apartment in the city.

Private market apartments are too expensive, so they usually have to live in dormitories.

During the establishment of the Special Economic Zones and other industrial areas city and local administrations built dormitory complexes that were leased to the factory managements.

But many companies started building their own dormitories on company grounds. On construction sites brick-houses are built for construction workers - only to be demolished again when the construction project is finished. 75 to 80 percent of mingong live in dormitories, in rooms 26 square meters big and housing twelve people on average (Lee 2007: 57). The actual conditions in the dormitories are diverse, ranging from shacks without showers and hot water to clean buildings with common rooms. The dormitories supply housing for employees but have other functions too: Besides reducing reproduction costs -

useful for the mingong as well - company managements can exercise control over the workers and also easily extend the working day because workers are constantly available. Furthermore, they can try to prevent dissatisfied workers from seeking jobs elsewhere. Pun and Smith call this the "dormitory labor regime" (Pun/Smith 2007).

Isolation and discrimination

Absence from home and their precarious situation in the city cause many migrant workers to feel isolated. Often their partners are still in the village or work in a different city. Until recently the children of mingong were kept out of urban schools and high fees still prevent them from entering schools, so most mingong leave their children at home in the countryside.

They grow up there with grandparents or other relatives, often seeing their parents only once a year, during the Chinese New Year. Meanwhile in some cities like Beijing private and cheap mingong-schools have been set up. In the city the mingong still face state discrimination, even though the situation has improved slightly in recent years.

Until a few years ago mingong were only allowed to work certain manual jobs in the cities, one reason being that some better jobs were "reserved" for urban workers sacked by the state industries. Recently, these restrictions were officially abolished - but that does not mean that urban workers are not still privileged. Even now mingong in many cities face rejection by sections of the urban population. For a long time the media stirred up those sentiments by calling the migrant workers "blind drifters".5 Even though the reports have changed now and many newspapers emphasize the importance of the mingong for the construction of the

"socialist market economy", this is not the end of their stigmatization and discrimination.

Between city and village

Despite the many problems the migrant workers continue to come to the cities, because for many staying in the villages is no longer an alternative. The village is and remains their home, their emotional place of identification, but you cannot earn enough money and there are no future prospects. As a result migrant workers swing back and forth between feeling homesick and their desire to get away, between a known and apparently orderly life in the village and the adventurous "modern" city life. This tension leads many young migrants to

"commute", alternating between periods of employment in the city and returns to the village when they have no work (or have simply had enough of the city), lasting only until the village gets too boring and they leave once more. This dagong, wage labor for a boss in the city, is actually not constituting a final move there but a double existence between rural and urban worlds.

Three things play a major role in mingong's thoughts and ideas (as in those of many peasants): 1. the poverty in the past (in the 1970s and early 1980s); 2. today's harsh conditions, even though their material situation has improved; and 3. the dream of setting up a business or shop in the village to escape farm as well as factory work (Lee 2007: 221). Only a few reach that last goal.6 Given their memory of periods of poverty and their current

material problems, mingong owning their own piece of land, land that any person with a rural hukou is entitled to, is particularly important.

For many mingong this piece of land still ensures subsistence. The village is their place of social reproduction of labor power. Here marriages take place, children are born and raised, and mingong come to recover and to earn a subsistence income in times of unemployment.

The land is a kind of informal social insurance, another reason why they do not want to give it up and move to the city permanently (Pun/Li: 42). Others come back to take care of their children or parents.

Income levels in the countryside vary, particularly when comparing the coastal regions, central China and the West. The mingong's money might be needed for

a house, a better school or for food, and in most cases their wage makes up to two thirds of the household income (Lee 2007: 210). Peasants have to take additional jobs and seasonal work to earn some cash whenever possible, and still, for many rural families dagong is a pure necessity for meeting all living expenses.

The biggest costs are: 1. children's education, so that the next generation has better chances for social advancement, 2. caring for ill family members and 3. building a house. Education and health belong to those goods that were commodified; for many people, especially in the countryside, they were becoming extremely expensive. There are several reasons for building a house. The old houses are cramped, inhospitable and easily fall apart, so that people want new ones made of bricks and concrete. But the new house is also an important symbol of the family's economic advancement and a precondition for the male offspring to find a wife. And it is the place where the mingong want to live when they get old.

What nearly all migrant workers have in common is that they have this opportunity to retreat to the village. They are only half proletarianized, and their identity as peasants and workers is intermingled (Pun: 20). They do not see themselves as part of the working class or the workers (gongren) because these terms describe the old, urban working class and have an exclusionary character. They conceive of themselves as peasants (nongmin), worker peasants (nongmingong) or incoming workers (wailaigong). Many peasants and migrant workers think of themselves as still "backward" and "superstitious", as an obstacle to the construction of a socialist nation, because they have still internalized this picture of peasant inferiority.

Still, in contrast to urban workers who got sacked by state industries (see the article in this edition) the mingong are not desperate or quarrel with their fate in a past world. They see progress and believe in a better future - despite the bitter daily experiences, exploitation in the factories, the hollowing out of the villages and the cadre's corruption and repression. These experiences anger them, and they want to fight discrimination.

Migrating and working in different regions, sectors and professions has created several subjects, like the construction workers, the domestic workers and the factory workers or dagongmei (see below). The migrant workers are still far from being a unified new working class, but that can change quickly through

social struggles.

Social cohesion and struggles

The mingong organize their daily life and work through informal connections and cliques, with people from their home villages and later with newly found friends in the factory, on the construction site or in the dormitory. They use these networks to get financial help, emotional support and information on the labor market and to communicate with their families at home, sometimes also to organize cultural activities like music groups or private schools for their children. In the workplaces these connections play a role in daily conflicts, in fighting for breaks, in slow downs, in the resistance against factory despotism and the use of the so-called

"weapons of the weak" (Pun: 195).

When mingong work on construction sites, often the whole crew is from the same village.

The recruiters, foremen or sub contractors are often mingong, too. In the factories the composition is more fluid, the connections looser, quickly formed and quickly broken, in part due to frequent job hopping (Lee 2007: 196).

For organizing struggles these social structures based on the place of origin - whether based on the same family, village, province or as a mafia grouping - often are not sufficient enough to resist the bosses on the shop-floor or company level. The migrant workers, coming from different Chinese provinces, need to overcome the resentments and racisms among each other which are based on different origins, languages, skin colors, class backgrounds and culture.7

The mingong wage many struggles. In 2005 there were 10,000 strikes in the Guangdong province alone (New York Times, 19.12.2006). Lee has analyzed struggles in Shenzhen, Guangdong, that lead to protests, mediation- and legal proceedings. Most involved four issues: 1. back wages, illegal wage reductions, and incomes below the minimum wage; together these grievances constituted about two thirds of all cases that ended up with the labor bureau: 2. disciplinary measures (or excesses) and offenses against (workers') dignity; 3. redundancies (Lee 2007: 164).

The protests mainly arise on the company level, rarely on the local level. Sometimes workers start a struggle because they are encouraged by strikes in other companies. Information on struggles is spread through worker turnover, through personal contacts with employees in other companies (for instance, people from the same village), or because workers and activists meet each other while complaining at the union office or the labor bureau. The dormitories not only allow the control over workers, they are also the terrain where workers form cliques and networks, exchange information on the bosses' tactics, discuss changes in the labor laws, the next steps to take and most effective forms of protest. Other places are canteens and hospital wards for industrial accidents.

Administrative and legal skirmishes at labor bureaus and courts play an ambivalent role between pacifying and radicalizing the conflicts. Some workers at first refer to the laws because the legal standards are often significantly better than workers' actual conditions. The Chinese labor laws more or less meet Central European standards but are systematically ignored. So when workers learn about the legal situation, their own fate is not seen as "usual misery" or "bad luck" anymore but as an open legal offense. This might mobilize people to protest (Lee 2007: 174).

The protests are less about the formal "illegality" of the situation and more about the need for improving conditions. When workers later learn that local administrations, courts and arbitration committees only discriminate against, intimidate or make fools of them; when they experience the public officials' sleaze, the intervention of the bosses and the corruption, all that can lead to a further escalation with sit-ins and strikes.

Often it does not get as far. Many struggles end beforehand for several reasons. On one hand the mingong cannot afford prolonged battles. Without any financial reserves they need to find a new job. In case they get a new job, they do not have opportunities to continue the collective fight for their demands with the old employer due to the long working hours and the barracking in the dormitories. If they do not land a new job they return to the village -

often hundreds or thousand kilometers away - where they rely on family support, and cannot participate in the struggle anymore.

Furthermore, lasting connections or organizational structures that could back up a longer conflict only rarely develop in the struggles. In the moment of protest

there is a commonality and solidarity that finishes with the end of the struggle (or the closure of a company) because everybody goes their separate ways. What remains are the village connections that help with

finding a new job or organizing the return home. Many activists who otherwise would have continued the struggle give up. Noticeably, struggles of the state workers in the rust belt against the restructuring and redundancies often last longer because these workers are not as mobile and have a permanent place of residence, even after being laid off.

State Reactions

An important factor in a struggle's ending is the reaction of the state or employer. Often police, security guards or hired thugs attack workers if they do not reach an agreement, if the employer has the right connections to the local administration or if the forms of the struggle are unacceptable to the state. Thugs and police usually single out the alleged "ringleaders". If a local administration wants to get rid of activists, they can be shipped into labor camps for

"re-education", a simple bureaucratic act without a lawsuit and detention and forced labor for up to three years. More serious "offenses" lead to court hearings and imprisonment in state prisons. The few attempts to organize independent mingong unions were smashed in this way and organizers imprisoned or sent to labor camps.

The mingong struggles and those of the urban state workers (gongren) and unemployed (xiagang) share some similarities, like the reference to the laws, the fragmentation of the workers and the localized activism, their organization in their living communities and dormitories, the repression in case the struggle escapes company boundaries and the arrest of the activists. Underground organizations are brutally suppressed, but the demands of (isolated) struggles are met - at least formally; whether all the promises for improvements are actually met is a different question.

Most strikingly, in both cases - of mingong and state workers - we can witness the intervention of the local state and the central state, contradictory at a first glance but in fact complementary. Decentralization of the socialist planning state in the course of reforms, elevation of the local administrations to managing profit centers in the new socialist market economy and strengthening of the factories' managing directors and owners, both with close links to the local party cadres and administrative leaders, have lead to the formation of a class of cadres and capitalists not only orchestrating the accumulation process but also appropriating a large part of the new wealth that the mingong produce with their labor. This creates massive social dislocation and provokes the specter of mass revolts against the new exploitative regime - particularly in China where this has happened before in history. The Communist Party's and central government's political strategists elevate concepts - some say they are only illusions - of the

rule of law, social legislation, democratic control on the local level and more. Some of these concepts have already been molded into new legislation, celebrated by state propaganda as part of their "Harmonious Society".

For angry proletarians and small peasants the laws and social concepts of the central state are an important reference point, while the local state is the most important target. The central state wants to keep this arrangement for a while since it can uphold its own legitimation without having to fully meet the masses' demands for an improvement in their conditions.

The central state seeks to increase its control over migration movements and to defuse the tense situation of the mingong in the cities.

We can see attempts to better integrate migrant workers, for instance, by allowing the state union or NGOs to take care of them. They get attention and support in the official media, through labor rights groups, workers' activists (mostly from Hong Kong) and even state offices. The high local government fees for mingong were abolished by the central government in 2001. In January 2003 it also eliminated the exclusion of mingong from certain urban jobs, criticized the back wages and illegal wage reductions and demanded better access of mingong-children to urban schools without discriminatory fees. Also in 2003 the

vagrancy law changed, and illegal arrests were outlawed. Before then police had often charged migrant workers with vagrancy and sent them to labor camps. In Shanghai and Shenzhen new chip-cards were issued containing personal data and residency status. The cards can be used at local offices for social support, family planning, education etc. In state language that is called "population management" (Shenzhen Daily, 9.2.2007; China Daily, 27.12.2006). The aim is to control migrants' movements and their rights to use local public services. Some restrictions were loosened for migrant workers in order to release further social tensions resulting from poverty, lacking or missing medical treatment and expensive access to educational facilities.

Some cities, for instance Beijing, discussed the abolishment of the hukou. According to the South China Morning Post the Public Security Bureau is working on a plan to phase out temporary residence permits in order to stop "discrimination" against the migrants (SCMP, 21.1.2007). In the province of Yunnan abolishment of the old hukou-system was already announced. But that

does not mean that the discrimination is over: The mingong still receive worse treatment, have to pay higher fees and experience the arrogance, unscrupulousness and corruption of the local administration.

What next?

First of all, that depends on the regime's further crisis management. In order to ensure its own legitimation and survival the regime has to "control" corruption and increase government efficiency. More formalized and institutionalized labor relations and strengthened courts and legal regulations could further lead social conflicts onto bureaucratic tracks. But will it work?

The mingong will continue to play a larger role in the cities. They are the most mobile and dynamic part of Chinese society. In some cities they constitute one forth or more of the local population. In Shanghai seventeen million people have a local hukou, plus four to five million migrants (China Daily, 13.1.2007). In Shenzhen three million "permanent"

inhabitants jostle six million mingong (Shenzhen Daily, 9.2.2007).8 It is unclear how long they can continue to commute back and forth between city and village or if they can settle down in the city permanently and win their social demands.

Chinese and foreign capitalists already complain about labor shortages and increasing wages.

A scientist from the Academy of Social Sciences in Guangdong province writes that wages and working conditions of migrant workers have improved significantly there. The monthly wage for unskilled work has increased from 750 Yuan (2004) to 890 Yuan (2005), for skilled work from 1,600 Yuan to 2,000 Yuan. The standard of the company dormitories has also improved, for instance, with air-conditioned rooms and rooms for married couples.

Employers who can not or do not want to pay for such improvements move to other, "less developed" areas. The minimum wage - in Guangdong between 780 Yuan in the capital Guangzhou down to 450 Yuan in rural regions - increased, too.9

In the future we might see an escalation as well as a containment of the struggles of the mingong. On one hand, illegal land seizures shut-off the safety valve of rural subsistence and destroy the hinterland, the mingong's retreat in times of

exhaustion and unemployment. That could escalate the explosiveness of the struggles in the cities. In 2004 forty million peasants already had lost "their" land and the "enclosure"-movement had lead to expropriation of three percent of agricultural land, for "new development zones", "high-technology parks" and

"university towns" (Lee 2007: 259). Meanwhile the number of conflicts around evictions from inner-city apartments continues to rise as long as the real estate "bubble" inflates and local cadres earn fortunes with business parks and shopping malls. This situation affects (former) urban state workers, stricken by unemployment and precarious jobs, by robbing them of the only social safeguard left after restructuring: the company flat (which they have

bought by now or are still renting cheaply). But it affects many mingong as well who are pushed out of inner-city districts into the slums on the outskirts. Can that be the start of a new alliance?

The old working class, a minority in socialist China, was already decomposed. Although by now the majority of the population is proletarianized or, at least, semi-proletarianized, this did not lead to the formation of one but of many working classes. These separated classes have to face the alliance of cadres, bureaucrats and capitalists that was forged in the 1980s and 1990s. How will the struggles of each of these working classes develop? Will they get together? What level of explosive social power will they reach? It is too early to say.

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mingong struggles

Source: www.umwaelzung.de - German website

on social struggles in Asia

Construction

2007

* In July three hundred striking workers got attacked by goons. The workers were employed on a construction site of a hydropower plant in the province of Guangdong. The attack left many workers injured, one of them died in hospital later. The attacks continued even after the arrival of the police. The workers had put down their tools because their wages had not been paid for four months. In the end the police arrested the boss of the company's security service and the construction site manager.

* In August the police prevented three hundred protesting mingong construction workers from marching to Tian'anmen Square in Beijing. The workers wanted to protest against wage fraud, since they had not been paid for a year. When they rallied for the demonstration the police arrived in buses. They forced the workers to get on the buses and drove them away.

Factories

2004

* US-based client companies asked the Taiwanese shoe manufacturer Stella to reduce working hours, trying to avoid the criticism of anti-sweatshop organizations. The workers did not agree with the measure, given that it would have resulted in wage cuts. One of the managers commented later: "We did not know that for workers 100 Yuan is a significant sum of money". Thousands of workers employed in two Stella factories in Dongguan started strikes and riots. In the course of the unrest company property was destroyed and managers were injured. The police quelled the turmoil, and one hundred workers got arrested. Legal trials were launched against ten workers, accused of violence, destruction of property, physical assault and so on. In his pleadings, one of the lawyers explained the background of the incidents: The workers had been furious for a long time even before, dissatisfied with the unbearable conditions in the factories. Eleven hours of daily work, six days per week, the bad quality or lack of food, delayed payment of wages. The legal sentences were relatively moderate, and by end of 2004 all workers were released from prison. This is probably also due to the pressure of international NGOs and shoe manufacturers.

* Five hundred workers employed in a factory of Ricoh - a Japanese manufacturer of office machines - went on strike in Shenzhen after a Japanese manager offended female workers in an obscene way and called them mentally retarded. Only after the bastard apologized on the following day, was the strike called off.

* In Shenzhen hundreds of workers of a home appliance manufacturer protested against the planned re-location of the factory to the low-wage area of Zhuhai, demanding compensation

and the payment of social security contributions. When the strikers wanted to rally in front of the gate scuffles started with the company security guards, who tried to prevent workers leaving the factory.

2005

* In Shenzhen 3,000 employees of Uniden Electronic (a manufacturer of wireless telephones) walked out spontaneously in solidarity with a dismissed workmate who had stood up for the right to form unions. Previously there had been several short strikes and discussions in the plant concerning the creation of a company union. Nearly all of the 10,000 workers joined the solidarity strike. They raised additional demands regarding working hours, wages, sanitary facilities and management behavior. But the focus was the demand for their own union. That was a novelty in China at the time. The administration reacted with repression: The strikers were locked in the factory and violence was used to prevent them from leaving. The strike lasted a week. After this week the workers were intimidated, the strike leaders had disappeared and many workers were sacked. Two month later the company announced the re-location of the factory from Shenzhen to it previous location in Laguna (in the Philippines), referring explicitly to the strike. Only two years before, the plant in Laguna had been closed and the production moved to Shenzhen, due to the lower labor costs in China.

* In Shenzhen 1,000 workers of a print-shop protested against long working-hours and wage cuts. The reason for the unrest was the managements' announcement to increase the daily working-time from eight to ten hours and wage reductions for food and accommodation. Up to that point food and accommodation had been free. The workers stopped the protest once the management withdrew the threat of working-time increase and promised the improvement of the food quality in the factory.

* In Dalian a series of strikes kicked off in seventeen Japanese companies (coinciding with anti-Japanese student protests in Beijing and other towns). The strikes concerned wages, accommodation and problems with the canteen. The workers went on strike at different times, each strike lasted several days. The police intervened and arrested ring-leaders.

* In Shenzhen 3,000 employees of a sofa factory walked out in protest against wage cuts and management's racism. The factory belongs to the Italian manufacturer DeCoro. The wage payments had been lower than expected which lead ten workers to complain about it. They were sacked, and when they tried to re-enter the factory they were beaten by foreign managers. Some of the victims had to be admitted to hospital. The managers at DeCoro are obviously violence prone. At the beginning of 2007 hundreds of DeCoro workers went on strike after three of their work-mates had been beaten. The three workers had

demanded higher compensations.

2006

* In Xiamen 300 female workers employed by NEC Tokin Electronics went on strike after they had learned that some of the applied chemicals are poisonous. They had suffered many health problems attributed to the chemicals. They demanded better working conditions and extra-payments for medication. The company agreed to the demands.

* In Dongguan workers employed by toy manufacturer Merton protested for two days against low wages and bad accommodation. The protest started in the company-owned dormitory and turned into a riot which was then joined by over 1,000 workers. Dozens got arrested. Their basic wage was on the level of the official minimum wage, but other legal standards (regarding overtime, pay slips, bank holidays, social security) were not met. The canteen food was bad, but the company still took a quarter of the workers' wages for food and accommodation.

* 3,000 workers of the furniture manufacturing plant Siu Fung in Shenzhen - with capital from Hong Kong - went on strike against long working hours and degrading treatment by the company. They had to work for twelve hours, but they did not receive an overtime bonus. In order to be allowed to go to the toilet they had to ask for a voucher. Security guards were accused of having beaten workers. The workers marched to the government's guest house, but they were blocked by the police and scuffles started.

* In Guangzhou more than 300 workers of a shoe manufacturer blocked the motorway in response to not having been paid for three months. On the previous day the management had done a runner and communicated via fax that the company was bankrupt. The police cleared the road blockade.

2007

* In Shenzhen more than 200 workers protested against the closure of Huangxing Light Manufacturing. The factory had been closed from one day to the other, 800 workers lost their jobs. The workers blocked the factory and asked the local administration for help, in order to get compensation from the company. They also tried to block a main road. Some got arrested, but they were released shortly after their workmates started to besiege the police station.

Allegedly the closure of the factory was triggered by the fact that Walt Disney - the factories'

main client - had withdrawn their orders after the factory had been accused of over-exploitation.

* Thousands of workers (most of them women) employed by the plastic Christmas-tree manufacturer Baoji Artefacts in Shenzhen took industrial action against long working-hours and against being sacked without compensation. For five hours the workers managed to resist the attempt of several hundred policemen to disperse them. Only heavy rain managed to dissolve the crowd. One female striker was beaten by the police, one hundred people were temporarily arrested.

* In August thousands of workers employed in two factories belonging to Feihuang Electronic in Shenzhen went on strike for several days and staged demonstrations outside the premises. Many workers got arrested. The factory is owned by the German company CEAG

AG, manufacturing storage batteries and battery re-chargers for mobile phones. Ninety percent of the employees are women from the inland provinces Sichuan, Hunan, Hubei. The factory management had asked them to produce ninety re-chargers more per hour. In case they would not meet the target they were supposed to assemble the missing pieces after their regular shift - otherwise their basic wage would be cut. The strikers put forward written demands addressing the management and the local labor bureau: wage increase, bonus for night-shift work, social security according to the law, clean drinking water in the factory. The labor commission intervened and the management offered negotiations. The negotiations turned out to be difficult, because the strikers did not want to send delegates, fearing the repression these representatives would face.

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dagongmei - Working Sisters

"In junior high school we read quite a bit about Marxist theory. When the teachers explained the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production in capitalist society they also mentioned the inhuman exploitation of workers. At the time we did not understand.

But since I came to Shenzhen for work I have started to figure out how capitalists oppress and exploit workers." (Female migrant worker in Shenzhen, Pun/Li 2006) Starting in the 1980s and 1990s, when China was becoming the 'workbench of the world', industrial clusters and special economic zones emerged in the provinces on the east coast.

Over one hundred million mainly young people were pulled from the countryside into these

new urban areas, or they pushed there, because they hoped for a higher income and better living conditions. Particularly in the regions around the southern metropolis of the Yangtze-delta around Shanghai and in the provinces Fujian and Guangdong towns developed into urban industrial zones, structured according to the needs of the factory system and the international commodity exchange.

In the factories young migrants from the countryside are employed. Their life differs significantly from the life of the old working class under socialism. These new workers are often called dagongmei (working sisters) and dagongzai (working sons). The gender neutral notion of gongren - the notion of the socialist worker sitting at the 'Iron Rice-Bowl' - was replaced by a gender specific notion which expresses their inferior status in a double sense.

The dagong equates to the term 'doing a job'. It expresses the fluid and marginal character and refers to an inferior auxiliary job for a private capitalist, in contrast to gongzuo, which is the term for a proper employment in a state-owned company. The definition of persons as mei (little sister) and zai (son) indicates their status as young, unexperienced workers in a subordinate position. The terms combined describe young migrant workers as helping hands and unskilled workers, as informal and unprotected. At the same time these are the very same workers employed in world-market factories producing consumption goods for the entire world - ranging from electronics to toys and socks - and who have a central role within the international supply chains. So, what do the dagongmei and dagongzai themselves think about their life and future?

Two authors from Hong Kong have - through their research of and interviews with dagongmei - provided an insight view of their lives - as women, migrants and workers.

Ching Kwan Lee has published an analysis of two electronics manufacturing

plants of one company, one situated in Hong Kong and one in Shenzhen. She describes how the dagongmei are subjected to a "despotic factory regime" in the production units in the Pearl River Delta, making use of the precarious life situation of the dagongmei (Lee Ching Kwan, 1998: Gender and the South China Miracle. Two Worlds of Factory Women. Berkeley /London).

In a later book she demonstrates how the dagongmei manage to unite and fight against exploitation and discrimination, despite the fact that since the 1990s their precarious position has hardly changed. In the book she examines both - the struggles of migrant workers in Shenzhen and the struggles of workers in the state-owned sector of the northern rust-belt Liaoning - and takes a look at origins of these two separated protests (Lee Ching Kwan, 2007: Against the Law. Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt. Berkeley/London).

Pun Ngai chose an electronics manufacturing factory in Shenzhen as the starting point of her research work, too, and describes the life of the newly arrived workers (Pun Ngai, 2005: Made in China. Women factory workers in a global workplace. Durham, NC). The relations of exploitation and power of the factory regime force these workers to have to cope with hard working conditions, endless working-days and dangerous or toxic production processes. They live in over-crowded dormitories in a hostile urban environment. Being newcomers they first have to make new friends and learn how to find their way around. Like other workers on the globe they slowly learn how to overcome the divisions among themselves and to confront the attacks of the management, with slow-down strikes and walk-outs as the most advanced forms of resistance in the factory. However, this process of empowerment is a slow and contradictory one, characterized by many set-backs and only bearable, because the dagongmei often change factories when conditions become unacceptable.

Recently Pun Ngai published another book in cooperation with Li Wanwei, a collection of personal life stories of sixteen dagongmei based on interviews with these women (Pun Ngai/Li Wanwai, 2006: Shiyu de husheng. Zhongguo dagongmai koushu. Bejing; in German:

dagongmei - Arbeiterinnen aus Chinas Weltmarktfabriken erzählen, Assoziation A, published 2008). The book retraces their biographies with all their contradictions: the necessity to leave the village, in order to earn money on one hand, and the urge to see more of this world and to take part in modern urban life on the other; the escape from the village and from the long arm of the patriarchal

family, at the same time the hope to return to the family after some years of work in order to marry and have children. The young women want to find their own way, but they send considerable sums of their wages back home, an important contribution to the family income and the reason for their better status as women at home. They find forms of resistance against arranged marriages, despotic foremen and the ignorance and discrimination of local administrations. Despite being exploited and oppressed by both the socialist state and the new and old capitalists, they try to fight for their dream of an independent and secure life.

Both authors show how a new working class is in the making, how young women fight for new possibilities, hopefully preventing equally dreadful experiences their mothers and grandmothers had to go through. They share this with dagongmei in other Asian countries or in the maquiladoras in Latin America.

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Footnotes

1 Figures by Chen Xiwen, financial advisor to the Chinese central government, see China Daily, 25.10.2006. Chen writes that this is a transitional period, and the mingong will finally become regular city dwellers.

2 The governmental Department of Labor expects 50 million new city dwellers between 2006

and 2010, China Daily, 10.11.2006. On top of that, there are the millions who are losing their jobs in the wake of the reform of the state-owned enterprises.

3 In some areas, especially in manufacturing in the Special Economic Zones, the wages actually increased by around 20 percent in real terms between 2005 and 2007. Since then inflation increased: May 2008, it was between 8 and 9 percent.

4 It was increased again in 2008 and currently (August 2008) is up to 1,000 Yuan, depending on the region. For the list of minimum wages see China Labor Watch: http://www.chinalaborwatch.org/2007wagestand.htm 5 They called them mang liu, , literally: drifting blindly; when said it sounds similar to liu mang, : hoodlum.

6 That is also known in Europe: rural migrant workers who move to industrial areas think they would earn enough money within a few years so that they can, for instance, build a house at home or open a business. Only a few can realize these dreams.

7 This is less about the ethnic minorities which constitute about ten percent of the population in China. Most of them live in western China (Xinjiang, Xizang...), in the South (Yunnan) and in the North (Neimenggu). Among the mingong the division into different groups of dialects and languages of Han-Chinese are more important.

8 Other sources speak of Shenzhen as a city with 10 million factory workers (migrants) in a city of 12 million inhabitants.

9 See footnote 3 for up-to-date numbers.

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